

# The battlefield of breadwinners and housewives

A study of gender identities and discourses of empowerment in Kenya

# Abstract

The study evolves around the emergence of a gender awareness in the Kenyan political consciousness, as a consequence of the adoption of the alternative development discourse, promoting values like equal participation and empowerment. My task has been to determine the outcome of local development initiatives in terms of women's empowerment and then relate the findings to theories on discursive dislocations and struggle for hegemony in order to create an increased understanding of the social processes behind gender based identities and interests. The analysis departs from the discourse theory articulated by Laclau and Mouffe and involves the deconstruction of local identities and social antagonisms, with the aim of studying the dislocational potential of the alternative development discourse. Four self-help projects in two different settings out in the rural areas of Kenya were chosen for analysis and the results are based on interviews and participatory observations.

Keywords: Discourse theory, social antagonisms, gender identities, alternative development, Kenya

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 A new paradigm in development

In the last decades of the old millennium, the debate on development and its practical implications suddenly took a dramatic turn as the actual essence of the concept found itself submitted to intense scrutiny. The focus of the attention shifted from the economic dimension and came to be increasingly centred around issues like literacy and access to health care and was even extended to previously overlooked phenomena like income distribution, participation, women empowerment, sustainable development and self-reliance. This was the beginning of the era of the alternative development discourse and produced entirely new perspectives on such a complex concept like development (Pieter see, 1998:344-346; Thomas, 2001:570-571; Copenhagen Summit on Alternative Development, 1995).

In the new development discourse, the concept of empowerment stands out like brightly lit beacon, overshadowing other components in the plethora of elements that all constitute the ever-expanding notion of development. Empowerment has been connected to decreasing levels of corruption, promotion of social cohesion and trust and it is claimed that it serves to reinforce government and project performance. Unequal power constellations present an obstacle to development effectiveness, severely inhibiting the aim of poverty reduction. Empowerment is associated with participatory, bottom-up approaches to development objectives, justified through the conception that freedom over economic decisions leads to increased development efficiency at the local level in terms of design, implementation and outcomes (Narayan, 2002:3-6).

Over the decades, the marginalization of women has received intensified attention in different circles of society, including the development industry. Women's empowerment is considered essential in the struggle for the eradication of poverty and is particularly relevant since women constitute the only category exposed to discrimination and oppressive structures cutting through all ethnical, political and social boundaries (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005:71).

In Kenya, the influence of foreign governments and international NGO:s has been substantial, which is clearly discernable in formal development policy documents (Laikipia District Development Plan, 2002-2008; Lutta-Mukhebi, 2004). Among many issues, an extensively defined gender perspective has been introduced, recognizing the importance of including women in decision-making procedures (Elsy et al, 2005:151; Udvardy, 1998:1758). Gender awareness has been formulated as a decree, going out to all political levels in society where representatives of the local administrations are instructed to ensure and encourage female participation in organizations, councils and boards (Sanoi, 2005-07-06).

## 1.2 Formulating an area of investigation

My aim is to establish the level of women's empowerment in Kenyan self-help projects, applying the conceptual framework employed by representatives for the alternative

development discourse<sup>1</sup>. Many of the texts that examine the alternative development discourse, refer to the World Bank as one of its advocates, which is why I intend to use their criteria as a measurement of empowerment (Mansuri & Rao, 2004:5-6; Williams, 2004:557-558).

The first part of the analysis will thus have an intra-discursive orientation, where the study evolves within the framework of the alternative development discourse. To understand the results produced in this context, a wider perspective that includes power relations within the society will prove to be more fruitful, rather than simply attempting to trace causal mechanisms. The next step is consequently to expand the scope of analysis to the inter-discursive sphere; to abstract oneself from the discourse and in contrast study the interplay between different discourses with hegemonic ambitions. In this case, it means that I have the intention to interpret my empirical findings, i.e. the empowerment outcomes, in terms of failure or success for the A D-discourse in achieving hegemony. One should observe that this indicates a theoretical assumption with its point of departure still founded in the aforementioned discourse, in other words that adoption of the A D-discourse equals empowerment.

The focus of the study is hence to establish the degree of empowerment determined by the A. D-discourse and then relate these findings to the degree of adoption of the very same discourse. As a consequence, the discourse theory that will be applied does not necessarily account for the establishment of causality, but should rather be viewed as a supplement to the original theory. Its explanatory power in this context can be debated, since it just adds another dimension to the results of the previous analysis. The theories cannot be said to be conventionally organized in a vertically structured chronology where results are connected to either cause or effect. Instead, they run alongside, relating to each other both horizontally and vertically.

In the following section, the concept of empowerment along with its theoretical implications will be examined and as a second stage employed as a fairly blunt instrument to measure women's level of empowerment in the self-help groups. The next step involves introducing the perspective of discourse theory to give an account for its applicability in providing an interpretation of formative processes in identity formation, which I argue are fundamental for the deeper understanding of empowerment outcomes. Sequentially, the analysis will be expanded to tracing the effects of these formative events, and finally, the chain of logic will be completed through reflexive considerations connected to the empirical findings.

### 1.3 Incorporating a dimension of "localness"

In Kenya, the spirit of self-help has been predominant in all corners of the country for decades, creating a tradition of locally managed projects where the beneficiaries themselves identify a particular need, formulate a strategy about how to address the need in question and implement the decisions made (Bradshaw 1993:352-353, Ngau 1987:523-524). Thereby, the

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<sup>1</sup> It can be discussed if the 'alternative development discourse' actually lives up to its epithet since its core values has been adopted and standardized by most major development organs. That discussion is however beyond the scope of this study and for ease of reference, I have decided to stick to that term despite its possible implications. From now on, the abbreviation "A. D-discourse" will be used.

Kenyan self-help movement can be said to correspond to a significant extent to the ideal prevalent in the alternative development discourse, due to its extremely decentralized character. Particularly NGO-driven development, despite its foundation in the A. D-discourse, has been accused of centralizing power within the organization itself, or simply redistributing power in a way that empowered some groups in society, while disempowering others (Kelsall & Mercer, 2003:293, 297, 302; Mansuri & Rao, 2004:7, 30, 32; Pease, 2002:136-138). By eliminating or removing the element of external intervention in development projects and letting the sphere of analysis circle around a decision-making arena entirely in the hands of the locals, one has a greater opportunity to study the process of empowerment as subjected to local interpretation and knowledge. The original starting point has thus been narrowed down to the question of what the outcome in terms of women's empowerment would be when the initiative is entirely local and the project is being managed by the beneficiaries themselves. It is worth noting that this problematization does not rule out the presence of external influence, but only allows it access to spaces outside the formal decision-making procedures.

## 1.4 Setting

With the purpose of investigating whether the gender specific alternative development discourse has managed to penetrate the social layers all the way down to the community level, I selected four self-help projects in two different locations out in the rural areas of Kenya, as objects of analysis in my study.

The first two projects are located in the village of Kangaita on the slopes of Mount Kenya, in Meru district. Kangaita is a small, relatively ethnically heterogenous community where the majority of the inhabitants are involved in farming related activities. Meru is the name of the dominating tribe, followed by Kikuyu, living side by side with small patches of minority tribes like the Turkana and Kalejin. In Kangaita, I visited Miriage Water Project, which roughly consists of 80 – 90 people, since 1982 constructing pipelines through which they convey water for irrigation of their farms. I also did research on Kangaita Secondary School, which is a Harambee-school<sup>2</sup>, recently built and run by the parents of children qualifying for secondary education, but without the financial means to attend boarding schools.

In the region around Mukogodo Forest in Laikipia district, I evaluated two self-help projects dedicated to improving the standard of living of the local Maasai population. The area is sparsely populated with small concentrations of people in the village of Dol-Dol, Kuri-Kuri and Seek, and ethnically homogenous where the Maasai tribe with its sub-tribes or clans, like Yaaku and Samburu, constitutes the majority. It is an arid area where its semi-nomadic inhabitants depend on livestock and to a very small extent farming and other small businesses. Most people are pastoralists, which means that although most of them have permanent settlements, they always have to be prepared to move in order to find grazing for their animals.

In Dol-Dol, I studied the Yaaku Culture Preservation Group that was started in 2003 and whose prime interest is to conserve the language and traditions of the marginalized Yaaku-clan. The group has also formulated development objectives, including the project of building a school for the Yaaku children. The umbrella organization consists of around three hundred

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<sup>2</sup> Harambee is a Swahili word, meaning "pulling together" and is applied on self-help groups hosting regular money collecting events to finance their projects.

members (sixty officially registered), of whom many are tied to smaller projects like women's groups or Mukogodo Honey Enterprise.

The other project is called Shormog Shamba group, based in the community of Seek where the members since 2004 have decided to partly abandon the traditional Maasai lifestyle and reduce their dependency on food relieves by turning to farming.

## 1.5 Method and material

The study is based on direct participant observations and interviews conducted with members from every project. My ambition has been to achieve diversification in terms of gender, ethnicity (where relevant), age and education, as well as committee membership. The interviews normally lasted between thirty minutes to one hour, where I as far as the situation permitted allowed the person to reflect freely around given issues. I mostly used a standard set of question, with minor edits depending on the subject of the interview (e.g. committee membership). In order to minimize the interview effect, ethnographic interviews have been the ideal and the participants have mostly been given open questions (Dyrberg, 2001:327).

During an interview, a "text" is created in the interaction between the two subjects, with the researcher actively constructing the situation. Interviews are thus said to represent the processes of power in a new context, which one has to be acutely aware of since the risk for defective conclusions is imminent (Börjesson, 2002:128; Dyrberg, p 330-331). Observational studies are encouraged to control the statements given by the interviewed subjects, since the presence of non-linguistic components in the analysis vouches for a greater accuracy (Dyrberg, p 331).

The analysis will be centred around the interview material that has been gathered, combined with field notes from the meetings that I attended in all projects apart from Shormog. Two publications from the World Bank, *Empowerment and Poverty Reduction* (Narayan, 2002) and *Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Empowerment* (Narayan, 2005) has been chosen to exemplify the alternative development discourse on empowerment.

Since theory and method are closely intertwined in discourse theory, this relationship will be further elaborated in the theoretical section.

## 2 Fixing the boundaries of empowerment

### 2.1 Conceptualizing empowerment

The meaning of the concept of empowerment is somewhat floating, assuming different shapes across different disciplines. Narayan defines empowerment as the expansion of freedom of choice and action. Broadly speaking, it can be conceptualized as:

[...]the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives (Narayan, 2002:14)

This definition has an explicitly institutional character and it is evident in Narayan's works that focus is mostly directed at the formal administrative procedures where the relationship between government officials and the common (wo)man is being emphasized. However, the concept of empowerment is also being transferred to other societal spheres, giving special attention to the unequal power relations between woman and man (ibid, p 25).

According to Narayan, empowerment has both an intrinsic and instrumental value. One does not necessarily have to separate the two and regard them as mutually exclusive, but empowerment can be viewed both as a mean to and end as well as an end in itself (Narayan, 2005:16). She encounters greater difficulties in establishing whether empowerment should be understood as universal or context-specific, but concludes that as a value, it is "clearly universal", while "the cultural context is important because culture consists of a relational system of norms, values and beliefs on which there is simultaneously consensus and dissensus, and that are permeable and subject to change"(ibid, p 16-17).

### 2.2 Gender and empowerment

Women's empowerment is a complex matter because it contains unique, additional elements that distinguishes it from the empowerment of other groups in the periphery of power. Gender is not an independent factor, which means that women cannot be separated and abstracted from a particular context and be regarded as one disempowered groups among many others. Women carry multiple, crisscrossing identities which also serve as determining factors in defining their position in society and consequently their ability to exert influence.

Secondly, the domestic arena is of particular importance as the household sphere and interfamilial relations are a central locus of women's disempowerment. Institutional transformation is not sufficient to achieve fundamental, durable change but requires a systematic remodeling of structures maintaining patriarchal dominance (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005:71).

Women's disempowerment is also a multidimensional problem, affecting all levels of society but not necessarily coherently. The different dimensions do not have to be interlinked, which means that empowerment in one sphere does not automatically conclude to empowerment in another (ibid, p 74; Oppenheimer Mason, 2005:90). However, when studying empowerment from a gender perspective, the household level and family dynamics

cannot be completely ignored even if the analysis is concentrated on another dimension (Deshmuck-Ranadive, 2005:103). The relationship between the public and the private often reflects community norms, which also have to be taken into consideration to produce viable results (Oppenheimer Mason, p 96).

## 2.3 Measuring empowerment

Narayan identifies four categories which may serve as analytical tools in determining the nature of empowerment. These elements are widely defined and the lack of specificity is probably a product of the generalizing ambition of the typology.

Access to information is perceived as central to the empowerment process and is based on the assumption that informed citizens are better equipped to access services, engage in constructive negotiation, take advantage of opportunities extended to them and exercise their rights. Information is also vital when it comes to holding state and non-state actors accountable for their actions and decisions. Withholding information automatically creates an unequal dependency relation and severely obstructs people from realizing their potential.

As a logical consequence, accountability is another norm that has to be fulfilled in order to achieve empowerment. The principles of accountability involves the process of making officials answerable for their policies and actions that affect the well-being of citizens.

The category of inclusion and participation stresses the importance of incorporating poor people in decision-making and giving them authority and control over decisions and resources. Marginalized people should be treated as co-producers in order to overcome exclusionary barriers in society.

People's ability to cooperate and unite themselves collectively to solve problems of common interest is the central message under the local organizational capacity-headline. This vital component measures empowerment in relation to formal or informal structures that inhibit people from organizing and mobilizing resources in order to alter a repressive status quo (Narayan, 2002:8-9).

These four criteria can be claimed to lack actual substance if they are forced to stand for themselves as analytical tools. A study based on this categorization will only be deemed relevant if it is put in relation to something, in other words by adding a comparative perspective. The first alternative is to apply the principles of temporality by regarding empowerment as a process, where the analysis concerns a fixed interval in time. The second method is to relate empowerment to the status of those in one's reference group, which in a gender oriented study preferably is being measured through comparing the situation of women to that of men. According to Narayan, the two methods can be used to supplement each other, which vouches for a higher level of validity in the results (Narayan, 2005:23).

One of the pillars in the World Bank notion of women's empowerment is the rather conspicuous standpoint that it can "only be considered empowerment if women act as agent of that change rather than merely as its beneficiaries" (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005:72). The emphasis on agency is a prevailing feature whose importance repeatedly is being stressed, and is classified as encompassing the ability to articulate goals and choices and to control resources and decisions that affect crucial life outcomes. The power of initiative and the formulation of needs plays a cardinal role and is exemplified through women advocating their

rights through collective action in self-help groups, assuming a personal responsibility for change (ibid).

## 2.4 Applying the model of empowerment

While the aspiration to construct a theory with universal applicability represents an omnipresent ideal **lurching** in the periphery of certain idea traditions, that feature is exactly what has come to constitute this particular theory's greatest weakness. Apart from defining the analytical instruments, it does not give any valuable clues about how to operationalize the study in question, but limits itself to vague recommendations about necessary considerations. It is thus apparent that the researcher is allowed relative freedom in modelling the tools to suit the specific analytical context, which unfortunately complicates matters significantly. In such a case, precision is a virtue than cannot be neglected. As the aforementioned categories are being transferred and adjusted to the level of the self-help projects, careful attention has to be paid to the delicacy in transforming such a set of instruments while making sure that the original values remain intact. It is thus a question of making them context-specific while at the same time preserving the notion of universal norms concerning gender, as well as seeking guidance in the views on multidimensionality and agency.

The categories will be viewed as overall classifications, superficial guidelines helping to create a general picture of the situation in the groups in terms of empowerment. Due to the lack of detailed instructions, an in depth evaluation is impossible.

The operationalization departs from the notion of measuring empowerment in relation to other individuals from the same reference group, i.e. by comparing women to men. Yet I do not intend to overlook the study of empowerment from a progressive point, but seek to relate the current situation to one's prior status. The main objection to this is that such an analysis demands data collected from at least two points in time, which unfortunately lies beyond the scope of this study. As a substitute, the members have been asked to give their impressions on any changes in terms of gender oriented empowerment since the start of the project, up until the date of the interview. Through the application of this method, I do not make any claims on establishing causality, since the risk of spurious relationships is impending.

## 3 The projects: Power to empower?

At a rather early stage in the research process, I made the somewhat surprising discovery that only two categories elaborated by Narayan, demonstrated any gender specific relevance. It turned out that despite striking divergences in the projects, the typologies “Access to information” and “Accountability” were gender-blind. Due to their interrelation, it would perhaps have been more astonishing if one of them had implicated a gender bias while the other remained neutral, but it can still be considered remarkable that these two criteria incorporate, alternatively discriminate, men and women alike. As it was, Yaaku and Miriage demonstrated insufficient transparency, lack of accountability and some indications of corruption, while Shormog and the school project seemed reasonably well managed. As a consequence of the gender neutrality, that section has been excluded from the analysis and more attention have been directed towards the categories of “Inclusion and Participation” and “Local Organizational Capacity”.

### 3.1 Miriage – Representation rather than participation

Women are well represented because some are married. Their husbands are there and they are talking in the interests of the public. If a lady happens to be in the meeting, she is supposed to represent the boma she is coming from. (Male B)

Miriage Water Project is the self-help group with the worst record in terms of female inclusion and participation. It does not even succeed in reaching the formal requirements of letting women constitute one third of the committee members (Sanoi, 2005-07-06), as only two of the nine committee members are women. The general opinion is that women do not qualify for committee work, since according to traditions, women are not allowed to instruct and rule men. Women are considered subordinate to men and are, following the statements from the male members, only elected to give the committee credibility and legitimacy.

There are very few women present in the member’s meetings, as a result of the prevalent notion that decision-making is the privilege of the man. This is particularly the case in water projects, since irrigation of the farm is regarded as the man’s concern. Women are involved in family matters which include cooking and looking after the children.

Men members are the largest group of members in this project. There might be women in this water project and those women are maybe unmarried or widowed. So... If a home has a husband, he is the most involved in this water project, more than his wife (Male G).

Failure to attend the meetings is punishable and normally a fine is imposed on the member who refrains from coming without producing any plausible excuse. Membership is determined in terms of households, not individually, which means that spousal representation is a fairly normal occurrence. Hence, whenever the man is prevented from coming, he sends

his wife, who seldom has any real meeting experience. She is not expected to participate actively apart from in voting. Her duty is to listen and report back to the husband about the decisions made, but primarily, as has been established, to avoid financial punishment. She does not speak unless directly instructed to and remains quiet and passive throughout the meeting.

A striking detail is that the executive committee has a female representative, the treasurer, who is clearly excluded from the points of interaction. During the meeting, the chairman, the treasurer and the assistant chief sat together on small chairs, facing the other members. On their left flank, the male members of the committee had gathered, also sitting face to face with the members. The treasurer was found sitting on the ground in the very periphery of the meeting place, a few metres from the female committee members who sat with the rest of the female representatives. The treasurer did not utter a single word during the whole meeting process and even her most obvious duties, like presenting the balance sheets, were carried out by the secretary. Most members believe that she does not have any real influence and there are frequent reports of the chairman and the secretary meeting without informing her.

On the whole, there appears to be plenty of informal gatherings and campaigns taking place within the Miriage projects and members give account that many of these meetings happen at night, to conceal the dubious nature of the event. Women and especially women with children are incapable of participating in meetings of this kind since their husband will not permit them to leave the home at night. The darkness also makes it unsafe for women to move around freely, due to the high risk of rape.

One should note that there seems to be a difference between the activity levels depending on whether the woman belongs to the Kikuyu or the Meru tribe. Meru women claim that they seldom frequent the meetings and that they normally remain passive if they are inclined to go there as representatives, while the Kikuyu women assert that they try to contribute whenever they attend. The two women in the committee are both Kikuyu, although the treasurer is Meru. Common complaints from the Kikuyu women concern the reactions from the men on those occasion when they are trying to intervene and air their opinions. According to reports, a woman's proposals are met with disrespect and she is not considered seriously capable of participating in any decision-making events. One former committee member said that she was not always summoned to the committee meetings and that it was virtually impossible for her to have her views met with sympathy. She also pointed out that she never got any support or back-up from other women.

There has been no changes since the beginning. It is all the same. Men do not accord women respect on the member's meetings and they don't take her seriously. Even if she has a proposal, they like taking men's proposals so they end up doing without women's proposals  
(Female C)

Since the women have no legitimate place in the project, apart from participating in the communal work, no tendencies for women to unite have been observed. Women are evidently held back by patriarchal structures, defining them as separate from public contexts. The Meru community seems to make a clear distinction between the public and the private and connects the woman exclusively to the private sphere.

## 3.2 Kangaita Secondary School – Unity through silence

During women's meetings, Merian women do participate a lot. But in the meetings that are for all people, men and women, they tend to be shy, because when speaking, they have to look to the other side because they are not supposed to speak in front of men. They cannot speak freely when men are around. (Female C)

The gender composition of the school project is the exact opposite to that of Miriage, at least in the general parents' meetings. Women constitute an overwhelming majority but are not being proportionally represented in the committee, where the distribution is ten men to three women..

A striking feature of the meeting procedures is that although the women outnumber the men significantly, the men dominate in activity. Of all the women present in the meeting, only one Kikuyu woman participated actively by debating and proposing agendas, while two out of three men did the same. The chairman repeatedly encouraged the women to contribute and share their opinions with the rest of the meeting, an initiative that was met with indifference.

There did not appear to be any difference between the way men's and women's proposals were received and the executive committee in particular demonstrated a high level of attentiveness and support for the contributions from both sexes. The members of the executive committee expressed in the interviews a concern that the women remained passive, despite profound efforts to promote their activity.

You heard the chairman who was saying: "Please, there is no lady who is contributing to this meeting." And he wanted the ladies to contribute. Because sometimes, even ladies have something to say. But it appeared that ladies didn't wish to (Male C).

Ironically, there was one incident that clearly indicated an informal link between the men present in the meeting and the executive committee, which further revealed the exclusionary mechanisms in action. At one point, the chairman announced a proposal, that had been discussed and adopted in the executive committee meeting. Immediately, one of the men requested permission to speak, rose and produced a note whose keywords formed the base of the man's exalted speech, where he expressed a tremendous support for the proposal in question. Having finished his monologue, the next man stood up, repeated the act and in panegyric words praised the suggestion. As a consequence, the proposal was approved by the meeting without further discussion.

This occurrence is a fairly obvious example of individuals in the possession of power forming alliances with other key people in order to gain support for their agendas and have them adopted through legitimate methods. It is quite revealing that the executive committee identified men as most capable of convincing the others instead of siding with some of the women. This might also be an expression of the lack of unity among the women, who do not demonstrate any tendency to recognize common interests or back each other up publically.

### 3.3 Yaaku – Bead work and resistance

When they come to the meetings... Most of the people are men, it is part of the culture. They have travelled and seen the world. But today we have also women, the representation of women, who are given the chance to speak. (Male A)

The task to trace the meeting patterns in terms of inclusion and participation, proved to be quite challenging since the statements collected from the members deviated greatly. In this light, greater attention has been directed towards my personal observations as well as to those testimonies that corresponded with my own impressions.

It was simple enough for me to carry out a brief approximation of the distribution between the sexes in the only Yaaku meeting I attended, since only one woman appeared on the scene. The other women in the absolute vicinity were the ones preparing the food for the participants, an activity that took place safely out of hearing distance.

The woman present was Jennifer, the coordinator, who has been described as one of the most active members in the whole group. Jennifer is an educated woman and the only representative who has had the opportunity to travel to the USA and to Europe to seek financial support for Yaaku language revival project, and is thus treated with solemn respect. She is an integrated part of the leading core and manages most of the contacts the group has with the outside world. Despite this, her ability to participate actively in the meeting is still relatively limited. She was evidently not being granted the same attention and recognition as the others taking part, and confirmed this stoically when questioned about the development of the meeting. She claimed that women to some extent still are being treated as singular peculiarities in the community meetings, but that the climate in the group sphere is more permitting, allowing women more liberties.

This notion has been acknowledged by all women involved in the study. There appears to be a logical linkage between the level of decentralization and the influential capacity of women, stating that the smaller the unit of decision-making, the higher the female participatory rate. The most palpable exclusionary barriers are encountered on the community level, but seem to assume more a more floating existence in relation to the level of aggregation.

[Women] have more voice when they are in the Yaaku. They have more unity there, than going to the public meetings, to the community. Because in the community, men dominate more. So they have less influence, although they talk. They talk, but it is not as much as in the organization. (Female C)

The meetings are still physically dominated by men on the group level, both in numbers and activity. The women speak less, raise less issues and are not encouraged by the men to contribute actively. The same pattern can also be discerned among the committee members.

The transformative aspect is being strongly emphasized by almost all interviewed members. Everyone claims to have noticed a fundamental and presumably permanent change in the participation of women in a positive direction, which constitutes an apparent contrast to the situation before the project was introduced. According to reports, women were previously not allowed to stand up and talk in front of men and did not have any place in decision-making procedures, which were regarded as a pure male domain.

In our tradition, we normally don't come together with women. No. This is something new. We are trying to teach our elders this, because in a meeting, a woman is not allowed to stand and address the meeting (Male C).

Now, men have partly begun to abandon their traditional views and accepted the incorporation of women in these forums, who increasingly have come to demand access to these spheres. There is a general consensus on the fact that men and women formally have equal opportunities in the meetings, but that norm and reality still somewhat fail to coincide.

The organization has a specific women's group which is aimed at money generating activities, particularly bead work which traditionally is regarded as a typically female affair. The ambition of the involved is to find markets for their beads and start producing on a larger scale and eventually channel the expected profits back to the community. To many of the men, the women's group is a component like any other sub-group in the organization; a unit that is concerned with yielding benefits to the whole group and nothing else. From a researcher's point of view, it may even be observed as an example of disempowerment, since it creates an environment where women act in accordance with their cultural roles, by supporting the community through gender stereotypical chores. The women have thus been transferred from gender neutral or even male specific arenas to spaces where they comply with the traditional norms of society. In short, their contribution is most accepted in spheres that lie within the normative framework.

In practice, the women's group has other functions. It also works a social forum where women get together to share thoughts and experiences with others in the same situation and formulate points of common interest and how to pursue them effectively. Through these moments of interaction, a new culture has slowly emerged, as a consequence of the more active women educating the others about their rights. The group is often described as a platform for discussion, where issues concerning the meetings are being brought up. The women claim that it helps them strengthening themselves and advocate for the rights more successfully.

The role of women is in the decision-making, for the rights of the women. The whole of the women's group, they will also educate other women to know their rights. So the rights of women will be transferred into the community. (Female A)

Whether this can be regarded as a formal manifestation of local organizational capacity can be debated. Since the group is not explicitly focused on improving the status of women, it cannot be defined as a clear cut breach with traditions. In vague terms however, the ability of the women to separate themselves from the organizational context and unite around common agendas without physical or cultural restrictions, must be seen as a development, which differs from earlier attempts.

### 3.4 Shormog – Majority through polygamy

Like, all organizations all over the world, in all places, women are being incorporated. Women have been given priorities. They are all saying that we cannot lag behind, we cannot

stay behind. Our women shall also be given the chances to lead and participate in the meetings and all that. (Male A)

In terms of notional dissimilarity, the Shormog group turned out to be even more complex than the Yaaku organization. Identifying coherence and societal patterns in people's statements proved to be a complicated and time consuming task, which was obstructed further by my inability to attend any meetings. Hence, I lack the observational foundation to which the reports of the other groups were related, which unfortunately affects the reliability rate of my results negatively. To compensate for this shortcoming, I will supplement my material with perceptions and notes from the community as a whole, although I am regrettably aware of the imperfection of such an approach.

During the interviews, most members expressed the conceptions that women constituted the majority or that men and women appeared in equal numbers. The Maasai men are polygamous, which has resulted in a surplus of women in the community. It is thus quite credible that women actually show up in larger numbers, since membership is distributed on a household basis. Perhaps the strongest evidence in favour of the reports on female numeral dominance though, was presented by the chairman who let me take part of his records on meeting attendance. The records clearly demonstrated that women compose the lionpart.

When it comes to actual activity in the meetings, the answers diverge according to gender. The women tend to claim that women are more or equally active than men, while men assert the opposite. However, it turned out that those who claim that men are more participant primarily focus on the executive committee, which for natural reasons dominates the meetings. Eventually, it turned out that there are a few women who always contribute, while the rest of them to a greater extent remain silent. Among the men, individual participation levels differ from time to time. For women, activity is centralized, while it among the men is more evenly distributed.

There were two women that were singled out as the most active ones among the members, both by themselves and other informants, and who do not admit to detecting any changes in the behaviour of women or in the openness of the structures. The rest however seem to agree that there has been an upsurge in female activity since the start of the project, which is also reflected in the attitudes of the community as a whole. Women appear to be more involved than initially and there are also reports of an increased responsiveness among the men to this development.

Up to now, there is a slight improvement in women's participation in the meeting. Not like earlier before when they were shy. They were very shy to talk and now there is a bit of an improvement in that they participate and can really interact with the men in the meeting.  
(Female E)

There is no formal women's organization in the Shormog group, nor do the members see the need to form one. However, women have gradually come to show a greater willingness to unite and many members report that they sometimes get together before the meetings to discuss matters on which their interests converge and then let one of the more outspoken women forward and defend these issues. These activities are very informally organized though and it seems that it is still more common that the women regard their husbands as their representatives rather than members of the same sex.

### 3.5 Nuances of empowerment

In terms of empowerment, the two projects in Kangaita demonstrate an extensive degree of stagnation and resistance. In Miriage, the situation of women seems to be frozen time since the start of the project in 1982, where almost no progress can be detected. This is also the case in the school project, which despite its youth and the devoted work of the executive committee fails to register any changes in female meeting behaviour. One might argue that the school project contains a greater potential for women's empowerment, alluding to the favourable atmosphere created by a supportive core of officials. This fact might be considered sufficiently true, although one has to bear in mind that potential cannot be regarded as equivalent to a symptom of empowerment. One has to remember the focus on agency, that women cannot be considered empowered unless they themselves act as agents for such a change (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005:71). In the school project, women have shown no inclination to alter status quo, but seem reluctant to become incorporated in the procedures. In Miriage, the meeting climate is characterized by marked hostility towards female participation and the women themselves appear uninterested in challenging this notion.

The Kikuyu women regard themselves as more free and independent than their Merian sisters, but claim that the existing norms of the Merian community force them into adopting a behaviour they do not characterize as natural. To earn respect, they have to comply with the Merian standards, which dictate female inferiority. Failure to live up to the set roles often gives rise to tensions and confrontations.

The relational perspective is essential in the Yaaku context and gives further support to the necessity of including an element of temporality in the analysis. In relation to their reference group, women cannot be said to have reached very far on the empowerment ladder, but in comparison to their former status, the development is far more convincing. Women might still shy away from speaking publicly and sometimes have their opinions met with doubt and sometimes scorn, but they are present and they do contribute in a way that manages to steer the course of action in a certain direction, which is a giant leap in terms of progress.

Polygamy is only partly applicable as an explanatory factor in the absolute preponderance of women in Shormog. The interviews express that women seem to fear retribution and punishment more than men do, which is also why they are more punctual. The women are thus more obedient, a characteristic with rather unexpected consequences. In this case, it appears that patriarchal structures, paradoxically enough, have helped promoting female participation, improving the influential ability of women.

## 4 Discourses and social constructions

Despite the amount of time that has passed since the introduction of a gender perspective on all administrative levels, positive empowerment outcomes are still non-existent or in the phase of initiation. The level of stagnation on the local level can partly be conferred to a failure of the A.D-discourse to penetrate all layers of society, a notion that adds another dimension to the analysis without specifically stating explanatory motives.

The previous parts of the thesis have dealt with the concept of discourse fairly carelessly, assuming universal comprehensibility without specifying its actual content. In the following section, this will be corrected as the principles of discourse theory will be outlined, forming an alternative theoretical framework designed to further facilitate the understanding of the complex process of female empowerment.

### 4.1 The constitutive power of language

Discourse theory is primarily concerned with the emergence of social structures determining the ideologically derived rules and norms organizing social life. Its social constructionist foundation is shared by other perspectives, often labelled interpretist, and built around the notion that fundamental concepts like “reality” and “truth” are socially constructed perceptions of the world that are contextually derived (Bevir & Rhodes, 2002:136, 138; Marsh & Stoker, 2002:28; Sutherland, 2005:185, 188). Ontologically, it juxtaposes itself to positivists perspectives, which claim the existence of an objective reality that can be studied and measured irrespective of individuals’ personal frames of interpretation (Bevir & Rhodes, 2002:151). From an epistemological view, social constructionism stresses how knowledge is intimately linked to power relations and ultimately dependent on the social context (Burr, 1995:4-5). The focus is not on identifying causal mechanisms, but on understanding political processes and phenomena shaping agents’ subjective realities, thereby defining the space for social action.

Individuals’ perceptions of reality are created through mutual interaction, reinforcing inherent power constellation in society (Burr, 1995:4). The constructive aspect of personal perception invalidates the notion of interest and identities as primordial (Howarth et al, XX:5), which means that they are viewed as being constantly redefined and reproduced in different social contexts (Hardy & Leiba-O’Sullivan, 1998:459). The key to the power relations lies in the study of language, which by functioning as an instrument constructed to bridge the gap between agents by making possible social interaction, is saturated by ideological formations reflecting the exercise of power (Bevir & Rhodes, 2002:138; Burr, 1995:5). In discourse theory, different linguistic representations are deconstructed and analyzed in order to demask and reveal the underlying power systems.

Central to the notion of the constitutive nature of language in interest and identity formation, is the concept of discourse. A discourse is defined as a regulated order of speech with institutional practices, which according to a less academic terminology refers to the

historically and culturally specific norms that determine the actual essence of a statement, that endow it with meaning (Börjesson, 2003:19). It is a structure located external to social actors and consequently difficult to detect, which is why its inherent logic is perceived as natural to those who are surrounded by it (Rossi, 2004:2). The discourse controls the border area between what is being considered appropriate or not, as well as rational, true, good, etc (Börjesson, 2003:21; Foucault, 1993:6-7). Howarth et al conceptualize it as “a social and political construction establishing a system of relations between different objects and practices” (Howarth et al, 2000:12). All objects and actions possess meaning, which is determined by a historically specific system of rules, bestowing people with morally charged identities (ibid, Bevir & Rhodes, 2002:138-139; Rossi, 2004:2).

## 4.2 Identity formation and social antagonisms

The discourse theory designed by Laclau and Mouffe stresses the notion that social relations and practices are intrinsically political, replete with ideological values determining its ultimate constitution. The exercise of power involves the construction of social antagonisms, oppositional forces polarized around one’s absolute negation of the other, where the discourse is manifested through the definition of the political frontiers dividing the two extremes. The discourse sketches up its own borders by dictating what lies within its framework, consequently exercising the power to exclude elements according to its own logic. The phenomenon of exclusion brings about an inherent vulnerability since the excluded elements always compose a constant threat to its existence, as destabilizing factors (Howarth et al, 2000:4; Dyrberg et al, 2001:11).

The primary focus is directed at the relationship between social structures and political agency by studying social action through the lens of interest and identity creation. Identity is perceived as ultimately contingent, constantly exposed to potential of remodeling, although it is emphasized that partial fixation of meaning is possible, if not necessary. The identity of objects and subjects is conceived through articulation of signifying elements, implying that a system of relation is established between different objects and practices. This pattern can be disarticulated, which is equivalent to dissolving the relations, and rearticulated in the sense that new relations of meaning emerge, modifying the original identity as result (Carpentier, 2005:200; Dyrberg et al, 2001:9; Howarth et al, 2000:7).

Social agents locate themselves within a discursive structure through their multiple subject position, forming the base of the agent’s identity. An individual is not a homogenous unit defining him- or herself solely through the signifier “woman” or “man”, but carries a plethora of qualifying subject positions like “black”, “carpenter”, “mother”, “vegetarian”, etc. These subject positions are constituted by ideological practices, determined by underlying social structures and shaping the identity of the individual. This aggregated identity controls in turn the behaviour of agents, modelling them into social actors. Political subjectivity alludes to this transition from agents to social actors, explaining the way in which social actors act. According to discourse theory, actions emerge because of the contingency of the discursive structures. However, it emphasizes synchronously the dangers of assuming structural determination and represents the opinion that actors are forced to take decisions or identify with certain political projects when social identities are in crisis and there is a need for recreation of structures (Carpentier, 2005:200; Howarth et al, 2000:13,14).

The discourse aspires to complete closure or absolute fixation, which is obstructed by its inescapable contingency. In order to create meaning however, partial fixation is fundamental and is made possible through the defining of the aforementioned social antagonisms. Social antagonisms are vital for the existence of political entities like discourses and identities in that they draw the frontiers of social formation, defining the constitutive outside of the hegemonic identity. The antagonistic tension is formulated as a presence of an “other” who prevents agents from fully attaining their identity, a blockage that keeps “me from being totally myself”(Howarth et al, 2000:9-10). However opposing, this relationship still denotes a mutuality, since one is defined through the negative identity of the other (ibid, p 10).

Directly related, if not equivalent, are the hierarchically constructed binary divisions introduced by Dyrberg et al, where the hierarchical element is composed by one pole being superior to the other. This relation does not, however, automatically imply a conflict, which separates them from the conception of social antagonisms (Dyrberg et al, 2001:171).

Social antagonisms are constructed through two distinct formative events, logic of equivalence and logic of difference. The first category describes the process of overcoming a system of differences and through the creation of equivalential identities establishing political frontiers dividing two poles. The logic of difference involves the opposite scenario, when existing chains of equivalence are disrupted and organized according to a new rationality, a disarticulation of alliances (ibid, p 11).

The formative stage is normally a product of a failure of the prevalent structure to accommodate new, threatening phenomena, with the result that the limits of the contingency are revealed, causing a breakdown of the discourse. It is the result of any sort of intervention disconnecting or reconnecting elements of meaning. This occurrence is called a discursive dislocation where existing identities are shattered, leading to an identity crisis of the subject. Albeit its traumatic effect, a dislocation also has a productive dimension, providing the breeding grounds for new identities. A dislocational shift can be compared to the creation of a vacuum, forming a lack that needs to be filled and thus constituting the foundation of the construction of new identity patterns (Carpentier, 2005:209; Dyrberg et al, 2001:11; Howarth et al, 2000:12).

A political activity that articulates different identities into a common project is called a hegemonical practice and requires unstable frontiers between antagonisms. Hegemony is a central concept in discourse theory, which is based on the underlying assumption that there is an ongoing struggle between discourses aspiring to achieve domination, to hegemonize its own ideological substance. When antagonistic divisions obtain social dominance, a hegemonic formation is taking place which includes the creation of new forms of social order from elements that have been subject to dislocation. There is a constant attempt from rival discourses to formulate counter-hegemonic articulations in such a way that the original discourse is exposed, deconstructed and finally dislocated, allowing a new organization of meaning to emerge (Carpentier, 2005:200 Howarth).

### 4.3 Analyzing hegemonical identities

To determine the extent of the adoption of the alternative development discourse in terms of gender based empowerment in the different self-help groups, an analysis specializing on the concept of hegemony will be employed since the aim is to investigate if and how the

constructed relations of significance prevalent in the A.D-discourse have been sedimented. The hegemony analysis studies how a discursive strategy has the power to organize and transform a chaotic field of unfixed elements into a hierarchically structured order (Dyrberg et al 2001:322), which corresponds to the hegemonic ambitions of the A.D-discourse and the way these ambitions are being expressed. Initially, one has to establish whether there actually has been a disarticulation of local structures of significance and secondly, if the floating elements are being organized according to the logic of the A.D-discourse. In order to do this, a deconstruction of gender specific identities will be carried out, which will be connected to the tracing of social antagonisms.

The aim is to detect what constitutes the woman's identity in the self-help groups and how this relates to her ability to participate in the decision-making procedure. Additionally, the identity construction of women has to be compared to the A.D-discourse in order to find out whether there are any tangency points between the situation in the projects and the discursive reality as it is being defined through the A.D-discursive lens. The element of transformation is essential in order to establish whether any progress of convergence has been taken place, which will be illustrated by the construction of subject positions and social antagonisms and how they are constitutive of women's identities. Through the analysis of possible rearticulations of social antagonisms, one will be able to determine whether a dislocational shift has been taking place, allowing the A.D-discourse to achieve hegemonical status.

In this analysis, a wide concept of discourse will be employed, which broadens the field of study from the exclusively linguistic terrain to include more general social phenomena like speeches, action and institution building (ibid, p 323). The main material will however be the interviews, which along with the meeting observations will be viewed as discursive manifestations reproducing the hegemonic interplay between the discourses.

#### 4.4 The A. D-discourse and women's empowerment

In the writings of the World Bank on women's empowerment, the woman's identity, as a singular phenomenon, is closely intertwined with the concept of social exclusion. She is cast in a vocabulary that directly signals victimization through the signifiers "disadvantaged" and "disempowered", indicating unjustifiable marginalization through social processes. Analogously to this notion of forced subordination, women are defined according to more positively charged signifiers, complying with the normative conception of women as "actors" and "agent[s] of change in [their] own life" (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005:71, 72). There is a need to "expand" her "abilities" which points to a potential, rejecting the signifiers of exclusion as neither intrinsic, nor permanent. The position as disadvantaged is hence only a temporary stage, an ill which development measures are designed to address (ibid, p 72).

An assumption of this kind automatically implies an identity blockage, a certain element preventing the woman from fully attaining her identity as an active, resourceful human being. This social antagonism arrives in two different guises; at the top of the ladder of abstraction as "patriarchal structures" or plainly as "men", appointed to represent these societal tendencies (Deshmuck-Ranadive, 2005:109; Malhotra & Schuler, 2005:71; Oppenheimer Mason, 2005:89-91) . Men are continuously referred to as reproducing women's disempowerment, through statements like "men control women, rich control the poor" and "women have to be submissive to men's decisions and desires"(Oppenheimer Mason, 2005:90, 91). An artificially

constructed hierarchal system of binary oppositions can be distinguished, where men constitute the privileged pole. This division is by nature destructive and needs to be disrupted through female unity and agency. Women's interests intersect on the empty signifier "empowerment", which through its presumed lack serves as an imperative for overcoming internal differences like class, tribe, age, etc. The authors strive to create a self-consciousness among women as collective actors in their own empowerment process, pointing at international conventions on human rights to legitimize this ideal (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005:72-73; Oppenheimer Mason, 2005:90).

# 5 Deconstructing local identities

## 5.1 Kangaita – breadwinners and housewives

In Kikuyu, women are called mutumia. And the meaning of mutumia is someone who keeps secrets. And men are called muduri. They are the people that are given the mandate to choose. To decide for the family. That is the meaning of muduri (Gichuki Githogori, 2005-05-08).

The gender differences in the Merian community are extremely pronounced, with the entire structure of the society centred around the discursively specified roles for women and men respectively. The Merian woman is defined in relation to her husband, or under different circumstances to other men of the Meru tribe, through a complex system of binary hierarchies that demarcate the limits of her identity. In the interviews, the subject positions most commonly expressed by both men and women were “housewife” for women and “breadwinner” for men, although they both united around the more overarching category of “farmer”. Gender specific characteristics according to the same binary logic were introduced by all participants, with the exception of the head teacher and the chairman of the school project. As a consequence of this correspondence in statements, the two projects will be analyzed parallelly.

The binary oppositions employed to separate the identities of women and men are infused with ideology, evidently reflecting the view of women as by nature subordinate. The divisions of “shy/brave (courageous)”; “gullible/smart”; “inexperienced/experienced”, “ignorant/enlightened”, “quiet/vocal”; “passive/active”; “inferior/superior”; “accountable/dishonest”; “uneducated/educated”, paints a picture of the woman as a deficiency, only achieving completion through matrimonial alliance with a man.

These people, these people... They are yes-people! Very easy to convince. Women are very easy to convince. To manipulate. (Male A, Water Project)

Because of ignorance! You see, the standard... Some of them fear to talk because they don't know how to talk or to argue. The standard of education matters a lot. In this project, men are generally more educated than women. Are more vocal. And they can lead them. Generally, women come for representation, nothing else (Male D, Water Project).

Most women are shy. They cannot speak out. Men are more courageous and they can share their minds (Male F, Water Project)

Men are more enlightened (Female B, School Project)

Men are braver than women and they fear nothing. That's why they speak a lot (Female F, School Project)

The division of private/public is also discernible, where the woman is directly connected to the domestic sphere. The public arena is considered male territory, which is justified through

the subject position “head of the household”, implying that it is the task of the man to represent the boma<sup>3</sup>.

In most respects, the man represents the privileged pole (with the exception of the division “accountable/dishonest”), with its dependency on its subordinate opposite to attain meaning. The signifiers classifying the woman are imbued with negative values, serving to undermine the legitimacy of her presence in the meeting procedures. Gullible, ignorant and uneducated people are easily manipulated, while shame and passivity severely reduce the ability to contribute constructively. These characteristics are thus produced to disqualify women from participating in the decision-making procedures, emphasizing their belonging to the private sphere. In the school project, their attendance is explained through the character of the decisions, which are immediately connected to the domestic dimension since they are centred around the children and thus of lesser interest for men.

The plethora of signifiers and subject positions forging the identity of women is, as previously established, dependent on the one constituting the identity of the man. It can hence be defined as a mutually constitutive relationship, which if it were to be challenged would disrupt the very foundations of men’s and women’s identity formations. Men and women are supplementing each other, serving to fill an inherent lack by creating a presence of something that is absent in the other. The conclusion to be drawn from the empirical evidence is thus that it is not despite the juxtaposed signifiers of men and women, but because of them, that there are no antagonistic tensions between the two. Through matrimony, men and women compose a holistic entity. Consequently, women will not form alliances with other women, because doing so would mean abstracting oneself from this entity, upon which the individual’s self-image rests. Such a breach of culture threatens her position within the discourse and is thus perceived as unimaginable for many women. The antagonistic relationships are instead to be found in those “liberating” forces like outspoken Kikuyu women and visionary officials trying to shatter existing identity patterns. Kikuyu women share this notion of antagonistic polarization, since they relate their inability to pursue their goals to the oppressive structures of the Meru culture which hold them back in the meetings. In the school project, where the atmosphere is more permitting due to the efforts and interventions of the officials, Kikuyu women play a more prominent role and appear more empowered. They are still inhibited by the Merian norms though, in a way that they cannot receive full support for their proposals due to the lack of identification with the other participants.

The Merian discursive system is marked by a solidifying rigidity efficiently resisting the attempts of the A.D-discourse to disarticulate signifying elements. Only the school project officials, who are educated and politically active, have succumbed to its ideological base. This does not prevent them from acknowledging the existence of a local discourse and playing by the rules of the game in order to facilitate the exercise of power, which is manifested through the tendency of the chairman to forge informal alliances with the few men that frequent the meetings.

The stagnation of the empowerment process can be associated with the absence of a dislocational event, rendering impossible the opportunity for the A.D-discourse to hegemonize its gender conscious values. There are however traces of a semi-initiated dislocation, which can be discerned through the notion on the general tendency to appoint women as treasurers. In Miriage, where no attempt has been done to justify the striking

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<sup>3</sup> Household, home

absence of women and where there has been no expression of a normative understanding of the concept of empowerment, the presence of a woman in the executive committee is explained as following the logic of local customs. In Kangaita, the word for woman is *mutumia*, originally a Kikuyu term, meaning “the one who keeps a secret”. Through this designation, an omnipresent notion of women as trustworthy keepers of things have emerged, defining them as particularly suitable for committee work.

In the school project, however, this fact is produced from the supporters of the A.D-discourse to exemplify its introduction in the community of Kangaita. In fact, it is in reality pointing at the opposite, which is that the A.D-discourse has been forced to surrender its core message. In order to create meaning around a threatening phenomenon external to the hegemonic discourse, it has to be slightly remodelled to be able to accommodate this new reality, which means stretching the limits of its contingency. As the A.D-discourse proclaims the importance of incorporating women in decision-making organs, which includes executive bodies, this idea produces a heavy clash with the Merian/Kenyan notion of female identity. As a result, the idea has to be connected to the intra-discursive reality of the local discourse in order to attain meaning. In this case, the signifier “keeper” along with “accountable” that both form the female subject position “treasurer” have been inserted to make it manageable. This is even notable in the Laikipia District Development Report 2002-2008, which in other respects reliably promotes the core ideology of the gender specific A.D- discourse (Laikipia District Development Report 2002-2008, p 29).

It is doubtful whether one can talk about a clear-cut dislocation of the A. D-discourse or any of the local discourses. It might be considered an example of a semi-adoption on the district level, where a dislocation of the local discourse has been taking place while the A.D-discourse at the same time has been deprived of its core message, forming a hybrid discourse.

On the local level, another example of the rigidity of men’s and women’s identities can be traced in the contradictory statements explaining the numeral dominance of one sex in each of the projects. In Miriage, where men constitute the majority, this fact is justified through the male subject position “breadwinner”, indicating prime responsibility of the shamba. In the school project, the existence of a female majority is connected to the subject positions “housewife” and “mother”. The striking feature is that the relative absence of one sex in each group is partly being causally derived by identical and thus by definition contradictory arguments, gaining legitimacy through the fixed identities. In the school project, the man is portrayed as the breadwinner and hence obstructed from participation through lack of time. The woman is in Miriage primarily the housewife, which also is related to lack of time, explaining her absence.

Mostly, men are committed. They are more committed outside their homes. They are looking for means to support their families. So when there is a meeting, he will direct the woman to go (Male A, School Project)

The only work that women have that tie them to their homes is cooking and if they cook early, they are able to go for the meetings. And the men have a lot of work to do, because they are the breadwinners, so they have to go out and women are the only people who are available to attend those meetings. (Female E, School Project)

We have women in the committee, but their working capacity... Always when they go to work, there is very poor work done. They are less capable. They are even... The working hours... They are late because they have to prepare food for their children. The lady has to cook first, make arrangements for other things... When she go to the other people, they have even gone home. (Male A, Water Project)

It is her husband who usually go to the meetings. She herself has a lot of work to do at home, her husband hasn't got a lot to do at home, so he has more time to attend the meetings than she has. (Female E, Water Project)

Thus, in both projects, the man is the breadwinner and the woman is the housewife and this specific identity of each sex is referred to as explaining the presence in one group while accounting for the absence in the other, through the element of "time". This can be considered a prime example of individuals sharing the same discourse seeking discursively impregnated explanations based in identity perception, when confronted with the task of justifying a phenomenon which is taken for granted.

## 5.2 Yaaku – Bravado conquering shame

In our culture, only the men are the head of the family. And the wife, she is just a housewife woman. The man is the head of the family. He is the one who will talk more than her. But it is improving, now [women] talk. They have the right to talk and ask questions. (Female F)

In the Yaaku group, there was a marked normative understanding of gender determined action, however with some incongruities, indicating the superficial nature of the gender consciousness. The general consensus among the participants is that there has been a profound change in women's empowerment, which is referred to as positive.

As in Kangaita, the formation of gender specific identities is structured around binary divisions, mutually reinforcing the subject positions of men and women. Depending on who is consulted, different terminology is employed which might serve as an indication that these constitutive dichotomies are in the process of dissolving. The most evident line of separation cuts between women describing themselves as the foundational core of the women's group and the rest of the members.

The fraction composed by the remaining members, define women and men in accordance with the following binary hierarchies (female signifier placed first): "listener/speaker"; "housewife/"breadwinner", "subordinate/authoritarian"; "unconfident/confident"; "shy/brave"; "committed/non-committed"; "speaker of facts/liar". This division, apart from including some examples of identical terminology, clearly resembles that of Kangaita, had it not been for the floating character of the signifiers denoting the woman. There is a tendency to claim that this type of organization is a relic from the past and that the categories have to be slightly modified in order to accommodate the new development that is taking place concerning the activity of women.

Before, women weren't even allowed to stand up and talk, but we see that it is changing. They are speaking by themselves, but we see it's gradual. They do not have that confidence. So

what they did in the beginning was letting one woman represent them all. So they avoided the issue of standing. And after a while, even two could speak, then even three. So there is something going on, something that is developing. Now some women are active, they participate. But some women are more passive. (Male E)

Therefore, the signifier of the man is often employed as a supplement when articulating the frames of the woman's identity, in order to achieve greater accuracy. In practice, this means that the divisional subject positions of "listener/speaker" now are being equipped with a male duplicate, forming "listener-speaker/speaker".

Much of the talk is dominated by men. Those participants are men. The talkers. But today, there is a bit of development, because women also participate in the meetings. They also talk. Some even more than others. (Female E)

The same change alludes to some of the other classifications, like "shy-brave/brave" and "passive-active/active". What is striking in the context is that it is only the female signifiers that undergo this transformation, leaving the male identity intact. This is also symptomatic for the divisions where the woman constitutes the privileged pole, e.g. speaker of "facts/liar", which shows no indication to change.

Consequently, there is no entirely fixed identity for women but elastic points of definitions varying with other, contextually gender neutral signifiers. While some women are characterized as compliant with the traditional identity patterns, others are claimed to have attributed themselves with the signifiers previously regarded as exclusively male. This has resulted in some binary hierarchies beginning to disintegrate, since they can no longer be defined in relation to each other. The opposition of "passive/active", transforming into the equivalential identity of "active/active", leads to the neutralization of the dichotomy, which can no longer form the basis of identity construction. There is less possibility for men to seek identification through a privileged oppositional pole since there are some women in the meeting contexts that have ceased to carry a negative subject position connected to imperfection.

Although the men present themselves as positively oriented towards this development, an underlying confusion can be detected among some of them through their attempts to arrange these influences in a familiar pattern. Instead of eliminating the traditional binary oppositions, an effort is made to preserve the hierarchical divisions through the creation of sub-categories by adding degrees, producing identities like "less active/more active"; "less brave/more brave", etc. This structure is also recognized by some of the women, who do not express an interest to transcend discursively arranged frontiers, although they challenge the contingency of the discourse by using the same method as men, through statements of being "less brave/confident/active than men, but more brave/confident/active than before".

The presence of an influential clique of women, regarding themselves as the pioneers of a gender awareness among the Yaaku, has probably been vital for the disruptive element in traditionally formulated identity nodes. The most conspicuous outcome from the interactions between these women, is the creation of a new set of binary hierarchies, where the women themselves constitute the privileged extreme. From their perspective, the accurate relationship

is described in terms of “enlightened/ignorant”; “promoters of development/obstacles to development” and “modern/traditional”.<sup>4</sup>

Women are more active to empower. They are the ones who have the spirit of development.  
The women have much more the spirit of development than men (Female C).

This sudden inversion clearly indicates a new relation of conflict, where the man instead of forming the identity of the woman, contrastingly prevents her from achieving that identity, which is aspiring to the same positive subject positions as the man. Instead of the man functioning as an identification supplement, he is now defined as an identification antagonism. By striving to become his equal, she has turned herself into his enemy. This antagonistic relationship has stimulated her to rearticulate her interests as gender specific, causing her to forge alliances with other women, despite previous differences. The signifier “woman” has began to marginalize the earlier proclaimed cleavages between “educated/uneducated”; “employed/pastoralist”; “landowner/tenant” and so on. This can be applied to the logic of equivalence, explaining how differential identities are being split and polarized around “woman” and “disempowered”, negating itself through the opposite pole “man”.

In terms of discursive shifts, the relative breakdown of binary constellations hints that there is a hegemonic struggle between discourses in process. Some women have clearly deconstructed and rearticulated their identities according to the same principles of the A.D-discourse. This emergence of a gender awareness has stressed the instability of the political frontiers, dividing the antagonistic field and leading to the creation of new antagonisms polarizing around the concept of gender and constructing chains of equivalence around women from different social backgrounds. At the same time, these hegemonical practices are resisted by other members of the community who respond to this disturbing change by organizing its manifestations in sub-categories expressing more detailed binary oppositions by adding “more” and “less” to the gender transgressional signifiers. This is an example of intra-discursive flexibility, illustrating the ability of the discourse to accommodate hostile phenomena.

### 5.3 Shormog – A lying minority of men?

Most women, they have visions. And they don’t lie. They normally say what is there. It’s not like men who say what is impractical and impossible. Women are more practical and that’s why they have been given more chances in the meeting. (Female A)

Shormog appears to be a unique case, clearly deviating from the other groups in a lot of respects. The existence of a few peculiar elements makes it difficult to find an underlying pattern of significance, as well as identifying a common denominator in the occasionally discrepant statements of the members.

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<sup>4</sup> It should however be noted that these divisions have not always been directly articulated in the exact shape that they are presented here, but are distinguished in the interviews through reports about the current situation in the group in terms of gender.

Superficially, Shormog gives the impression of representing the same supplemental identity constructions as the ones encountered in the other settings where oppositional signifiers serve to forge a unity of women forming their identities in relation to the man (husband) and vice versa. The binary systems are not as pronounced in the Shormog group as elsewhere, which means that the divisions fail to polarize into dichotomies. When the women are characterized as “obedient”, a degree indicator is being attached onto the female signifier, thus defining the men as “less obedient”, “less punctual” and “less cooperative”. These divisions are also of a more floating, transcendental nature which *might* indicate a greater tendency to reason in gender neutral terms.

One of the motives behind classifying Shormog as an anomaly is that the privileged poles in the binary hierarchies in most cases are constituted by the female signifiers. The exception to this rule is the inescapable division of “shy/brave” which serves as an explanatory factor to the passivity of some women and at the same time justifying that the man, according to tradition, is appointed to represent and speak on the behalf of the boma. In the leading core, this dichotomy seems to be gradually dissolving, creating an equivalential relationship in the form of “brave/brave” (never “shy/shy”), which in turn affects the other dependent variables, like “passive/active” (“active/active”). In contrast to the Yaaku group, this establishment of parities has not bred antagonisms, neither between the husband and the wife nor between the women and the rest of the group members.

Some women say that their husband has spoken, so there is no need for them to participate. They are a bit shy to stand up all the time and talk in front of men. But we have a few who normally talk. They are courageous, just like men. There is one lady, whom they listen to even more to than sometimes the men. Normally when they meet, they don't want to meet without her. (Male D)

Irrespective of differential or equivalential identities, the woman still identifies with her husband more than with any other members of the group. Potential intra-group antagonisms are hard to detect, but one that is vaguely discernible has emerged between the boma and other men, seldom between two bomas. This can be causally derived by referring to the only context where men do not represent the boma they come from: in the dichotomy of “truth speakers” and “liars”. This is the most pronounced binary hierarchy and legitimizes the incorporation and increasing activity levels of women, along with the other positive signifiers. Men that are accused of lying are all of a sudden not regarded as speaking on the behalf of their wives, since this oppositional category enjoys such a strong position that women seldom are being associated with untruthful narration.

Gender specific identities thus have some validity in explaining social action of women, but it is evidently highly irrelevant in mapping the construction of social antagonisms. Apparently, the antagonisms are not to be found within the group, but in the relations the group maintain with external actors. This is where the real antagonistic tensions are encountered, according to members manifesting themselves through the strong emotions that are being stirred up when non-members because of “jealousy” try to destroy the unity of the group. There are frequent reports of (male) non-members contacting (male) group participants to form alliances, with the aim of either acquiring a channel of influence to steer the course of action in a certain direction (e.g. granting membership to applicants rejected as “unsuitable”) or simply creating a wedge between the members, hoping that the internal divisions would

cause the group to disintegrate. Outsiders are associated with signifiers like “ignorant”, “lazy” and are being portrayed as destructive forces, which further strengthens the internal unity of the project.

Hence, men and women define themselves primarily as “members” and “farmers”, marking a difference between themselves and the people located in the exterior. Gendered subject positions like “breadwinner/housewife” are not mentioned at all, which indicates that men and women on the group arena are conceived in gender neutral terminology. In the domestic sphere, the roles of men and women are thoroughly defined according to a pronounced gender biased local order, but remarkably enough, these differences seem to have been overcome in the project.

Connecting these interpretations to the logic of dislocation, one can conclude that an incomplete discursive shift has occurred, rearticulating some of the binary hierarchies where the woman constitutes the marginalized pole. The divisions privileging the woman have not been subject to transformation, a fact that might be understood as the existence of a general conception of women as belonging in the decision-making procedures, which has to be modified and adjusted to local discursive frames in order to become intelligible. The understanding of the incorporation of women as a positive phenomenon is thus not superficial, but has to be legitimized according to the rules dictated by the local discourse.

Although I failed to trace the previous structures of social antagonisms, it is evident that new ones have emerged concomitantly with the development of the project. The question is, how can these tensions be related to a congruent shift in favour of the A.D-discourse, when there seems to be no gender defined nodes of conflict between men and women? A closer study of the A.D-discourse reveals that the antagonistic tensions are not constructed between men and women per se. Instead, the real antagonisms are identified between social actors promoting female empowerment, and those obstructing it, which in many contexts, although not always, happens to be equivalent with antagonistic relations between women and men.

Hence, the antagonisms prevalent in the Seek community are found between outsiders, striving to annihilate, not necessarily the group, but the ideals that the project represents, and the insiders, working to protect and preserve the very same ideals. These core values are centred around the principles of successive development, including the importance of involving women.

## 5.4 Reflections on dislocation and empowerment

In the self-help groups of Kangaita, one might conclude that there are no traces of a discursive dislocation taking place, which means that the alternative development discourse so far poses no real threat to the solid, local discourses on gender based identity. Miriage is an old group with the majority of the participants attaining membership during the first decade of the project, which could be one of the reasons behind the striking level of resistance to the idea of incorporating women in the decision-making procedures. They received their certificate in an era where gender conscious discourses had not yet become articulated and although they have been forced to modify their bylaws in accordance with the new governmental directive, it does not seem to have altered their original views on women’s roles and abilities.

Following this argument, the potential for empowerment in the school project should thus be greater due to its recent formation. Apparently, this is not a valid explanatory factor since it

is only the educated elite of the group that actually displays a gender awareness in parity with the one promoted by the A.D-discourse. It should be noted that the participants in the school project still expressed a higher level of understanding concerning the appropriateness of referring to the A.D-discourse, than in Miriage. However, the identities of women appear rigid enough and unless a drastic rupture occur, resulting in a durable identity crisis, immediate transformation seems unlikely.

The Yaaku group took off fairly recently, but has during its short period of activity already been in contact with a few national and international NGO:s, which have to a varying extent provided them with financial support. The leading core is very active and participate on a regular basis in workshops hosted by development organizations nationally and abroad. This fact might have left its imprint on the prevailing intra-group ideology and may explain the relative disarticulation of the identities of women in nodal positions.

There is a development of those that have been on the outside. Whenever they come, women come, men come and they teach the women. So when [non-group members] see this development, that women are integrated in the community... They are not in other communities. So now women come and want to participate. It is the exposure. Many women have attended seminars and workshops and that is that advocacy that many of them have gone through. So through that advocacy, they have now come to realize their rights (Female E, Yaaku).

The formation of Shormog has meant a dramatic change for the participants, since they have abstracted themselves from the traditional, pastoralist Maasai lifestyle and turned to agriculture in order to secure their survival. This transgression might have created an identification vacuum, waiting to be filled. One of the initiators of the group, the chairman, has been taking part in several local workshops on development, hosted by different NGO:s. He is the one who has been educating the others in agricultural methods and is met with admiration and respect from the other group members. The chairman is also a very active promoter of women's rights and have publicly emphasized the importance of granting women access to decision-making forums.

I am very happy now, because [women] can speak in a meeting and in all the other meetings. So it is now very open for everybody. My group was the first group to show that the woman is very important. So they are now very much open to speak everywhere. There has been a change in our traditions (Male C, Shormog).

The transition from pastoralism to agriculture can be defined as the dislocational event leading to a disarticulation of traditional gender divisions. As new tasks emerged, there was a need to formulate new identities compatible with the distribution of duties. With Charles being one of the more influential characters of the project, his gender awareness was incorporated into the group, leading to the dissolving of existing gender biased identities. Still, the dislocation did not bring elements typical for the A. D-discourse, which is manifested in the lack of tangency between the identity of the woman in relation to agency.

## 6 Concluding remarks

The aim of this study has been to demonstrate how development outcomes in terms of empowerment are closely associated with the existence of local power structures and how their constitution is crucial for their transformative potential. It has also aspired to presenting the benefits of supplementing conventional theory on women's empowerment with discourse theory in order to paint a more holistic picture of the complex processes connected to the remodeling of sedimented gender roles. This perspective has provided us with further insights regarding the creation of a gender awareness in the different projects and the mechanisms allowing such a development to occur.

The projects have demonstrated marked divergences in the adoption of a gender perspective favouring the inclusion of women. While the local belief systems prevalent in the projects of Kangaita are characterized by a durable rigidity, the Maasai groups of Mukogodo show cautious tendencies to transform their traditional gender identity patterns. These results partly points to the difficulties in finding local support for centrally imposed values, a top-down strategy contradicting the ideal of bottom-up approaches. It is perhaps not so striking that the projects that have had sporadic contact with NGO:s show the most positive records in terms of women's empowerment, keeping in mind the departure point of this study, which is equalling the concept of empowerment to the successful adoption of the A.D-discourse. These results are not, despite appearance, running contrary to the initial assumption that external intervention leads to a reproduction of societal stratification and further disempowerment of marginalized groups. One must differentiate between intervention and influence, where the previous category implies a direct channel to the decision-making forum. Influence is in this context indirect, originating from educational workshops hosted by development organizations, which brings about a relative freedom of interpretation.

Throughout the whole thesis, I have intentionally avoided a normative discussion about the appropriateness of conceptualizing empowerment according to the World Bank categorization. One type of criticism directed towards the A.D-discourse concerns the tangible streak of westernization, ideologically manifested in the enforced universalism of the discourse. Research have for example established that Kikuyu women traditionally were better equipped to safeguard their interests common to their gender, before modernist development workers started to redefine their goals (Udvardy, 1998). Others claim that the tendency to unconditionally privilege the local diverts the attention from intra-community power constellations, forming an obstacle to successful development outcomes (Williams, 2004:562). Local romanticism or not, this debate gives rise to interesting questions regarding how local knowledge can be granted space in centrally articulated development strategies, which ultimately is about how a synthesis can be reached between the universal and the particular. This might provide a starting point for future research, by combining the empirical and normative perspectives in order to elaborate a more delicate instrument in measuring empowerment.

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# 8 Interviews

## Kangaita Secondary School

**Female A** – Committee member

Age: 46

Tribe: Meru

Level of education: ?

Occupation: Teacher

**Female B** – Committee member

Age: 40

Tribe: Meru

Level of education: Form 2<sup>5</sup>

Occupation: Farmer

**Female C**

Age: 51

Tribe: Kikuyu

Level of education: Standard 4

Occupation: Farmer / Housewife

**Female D**

Age: 41

Tribe: Meru

Level of education: Standard 5

Occupation: Farmer

**Female E**

Age: 39

Tribe: Kikuyu

Level of education: Standard 6

Occupation: Farmer

**Female F**

Age: 38

Tribe: Kikuyu

Level of education: Standard 7

Occupation: Farmer

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<sup>5</sup> The Kenyan educational system consists of two levels; primary and secondary. The primary level is composed by Standard 1-8 and the secondary level by Form 1-4, which means that a child that completes his or her education has spent roughly twelve years in school.

**Male A**

Age: 35

Tribe: Meru

Level of education: Bachelor's degree in Education

Occupation: Teacher (headteacher)

**Male B - Chairman**

Age: 45

Tribe: Meru

Level of education: Form 4

Occupation: Businessman, local candidate for KANU<sup>6</sup>

**Male C – Married to a committee member**

Age: 43

Tribe: Meru

Level of education: Form 6

Occupation: Farmer

**Male D**

Age: 55

Tribe: Imbra

Level of education: Form 4

Occupation: Farmer

## Miriage Water Project

**Female A - Treasurer**

Age: 39

Tribe: Meru

Level of education: Standard 8

Occupation: Farmer

**Female B**

Age: 58

Tribe: Kikuyu

Level of education: Standard 5

Occupation: Farmer

**Female C - Former committee member, now with water disconnected**

Age: 40

Tribe: Kikuyu

Level of education: Form 2

Occupation: Farmer

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<sup>6</sup> Kenyan African National Union. Oppositional party associated with previous president Daniel arap Moi.

**Female D** – Committee member

Age: 47

Tribe: Kikuyu

Level of education: Form 4

Occupation: Housewife / Farmer

**Female E**

Age: 63

Tribe: Kikuyu

Level of education: Standard 6

Occupation: Farmer

**Male A** – Former committee member

Age: 42

Tribe: Meru

Level of education: Form 4

Occupation: Farmer

**Male B** – Former committee member

Age: 81

Tribe: Kikuyu

Level of education: Standard 1

Occupation: Farmer

**Male C**

Age: 45

Tribe: Meru

Level of education: Standard 7

Occupation: Farmer

**Male D** – Former committee member

Age: 45

Tribe: Kikuyu

Level of education: Form 4

Occupation: Teacher

**Male E**

Age: 58

Tribe: Meru

Level of education: Cambridge Certificate

Occupation: Teacher (retired)

**Male F**

Age: 69

Tribe: Meru

Level of education: Standard 5

Occupation: Farmer / Pastor

**Male G**

Age: 72

Tribe: Kikuyu

Level of education: Standard 8

Occupation: Farmer

## Yaaku Culture Preservation Group

**Female A**

Age: 27

Occupation: Housewife

Level of education: Standard 8

Tribe: Yaaku

**Female B**

Age: 27

Occupation: Secretary

Level of education: Form 4

Tribe: Yaaku

**Female C**

Age: 40

Occupation: Housewife

Tribe: Yaaku

Level of education: Illiterate, has attended classes as an adult

**Female D**

Age: 42

Occupation: Housewife

Tribe: Yaaku

Level of education: None, literate in Swahili

**Female E**

Age: Unknown, around 40

Occupation: Housewife

Tribe: Yaaku

Level of education: Illiterate

**Female F**

Age: 23

Tribe: Yaaku

Occupation: Unemployed

Level of education: Standard 8

**Male A**

Age: 77

Level of education: None, literate in Swahili and Maasai

Tribe: Yaaku

Occupation: Pastoralist

**Male B**

Age: 49

Occupation: Pastoralist

Level of education: Standard 4

Tribe: Yaaku

**Male C**

Age: 54

Tribe: Yaaku

Level of education: Form 2

Occupation: Manager

**Male E**

Age: 40

Level of education: Standard 8

Occupation: Pastoralist

Tribe: Yaaku

**Male F - Chairman**

Age: 33

Tribe: Yaaku

Level of education: Standard 8

Occupation: Pastoralist

**Male G - Secretary**

Age: 25

Tribe: Yaaku

Level of education: Form 4

Occupation: Pastoralist

**Male H – Manager (treasurer)**

Age: 29

Level of education: Form 4

Occupation: Pastoralist

## Shormog Shamba Group

### **Female A** – Married to Chairman

Age: 42

Tribe: Samburu

Level of education: Illiterate

Occupation: Farmer / Pastoralist / Housewife

### **Female B** – Committee member

Age: ca 40

Tribe: Samburu

Level of education: Illiterate

Occupation: Pastoralist

### **Female C** – Committee member

Age: ca 40

Tribe: Samburu

Level of education: Illiterate

Occupation: Pastoralist / Farmer

### **Female D** – Committee member

Age: Unknown, ca 40

Tribe: Samburu

Level of education: Illiterate

Occupation: Pastoralist

### **Female E**

Age: 50

Tribe: Yaaku

Level of education: Illiterate

Occupation: Pastoralist / Housewife

### **Male A**

Age: 50

Level of education: Literate in Swahili

Tribe: Yaaku

Occupation: Pastoralist / Farmer

### **Male B** – Committee member

Age: 45

Tribe: Samburu

Level of education: Illiterate

Occupation: Pastoralist / Farmer

### **Male C** - Chairman

Age: 42  
Tribe: Mix Yaaku / Samburu  
Level of education: Standard 4  
Occupation: Farmer / Ranger (used to work with tourists in the lodges)

**Male D**

Age: 50  
Level of education: Illiterate  
Occupation: Pastoralist / Farmer

**Male E - Treasurer**

Age: 40  
Tribe: Samburu  
Level of education: Slightly literate in Swahili  
Occupation: Pastoralist

## Officials

Date: 2005-05-12  
Name: Haram Ntere (sub-chief)  
Age: 42  
Tribe: Meru  
Level of education: ?  
Occupation: Assistant chief (former police officer)

Date: 2005-07-06  
Name: Wilfred Sanoi  
Age: 52  
Tribe: Maasai  
Level of education: Form 2  
Occupation: Community Development Assistant (15 years)

## Guide and interpreter

Date: 2005-05-08  
Name: Gichuki Githogori  
Age: 26  
Tribe: Kikuyu  
Level of education: Form 4  
Occupation: Unemployed. Human rights activist